

Action research as a teaching armoury for the language teacher

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Abstract

Given the easy availability of information due to social media, language teachers need to move beyond their role as mere disseminators of information to [that of](#) as an innovator, enabling learners to think critically. To do so, language teachers must make action research an indispensable part of their language teaching armoury. They must realise that the challenges of teaching, be it student disinterest, poor comprehension skills or weak performances can be tackled. One way of doing so is to conduct some research within their own classrooms so as to seek solutions to overcome these challenges. This paper highlights the importance of action research and how it can be conducted. Using two case studies as examples, this paper hopes that these experiences in action research will encourage teachers to conduct their own classroom research in overcoming any [issue](#) they face in their respective language classrooms. It is also hoped that this recommendation can enable teachers move beyond their traditional roles of merely providing information to students [to creating greater learning opportunities and experience in class](#). Last but not least, this paper aims to motivate teachers to further enhance themselves in facing the current challenges of language teaching.

Keywords: *action research, language teaching, reflection*

Introduction

Preparation for English language teachers to motivate and teach their students should involve more than just providing techniques, recipes and tips for language learning. Teachers need to develop their own practices after finishing their formal training and courses. In order to do that, teachers need to question themselves [of](#) what can be done to improve their students' learning; teachers must also aspire to improve their own teaching practices in response to changing conditions and experiences (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In this regard, teachers can resort to a number of strategies such as attending refresher courses, seek mentors, register for higher programs of learning, or they can conduct research in their own classrooms pertaining to specific issues which have been noticed. Kurt Lewin, then a professor at MIT, called such kind of research as action research, a term which was coined in 1948.

Action research may be integrated into teacher preparation programs so that future teachers can try out new approaches of teaching. It is also useful [a method](#) for teachers to investigate issues in their own teaching. Burns (2009, p.6) notes that “many teachers have been put off research and the theories about teaching they were taught in teacher training courses because they find out that when they get into the classroom the theory does not match the reality”. As teachers, there are also other impediments as elaborated by Atay (2006). Focusing on teachers in Turkey, Atay (2006, p.1) mentions that “...neither pre-service nor in-service teachers of English can do much research in

Turkey because pre-service teachers generally cannot get permission from schools for research while in-service teachers do not have sufficient time and training to conduct research”.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education, through observations, has not put the idea of action research into the syllabus or curriculum. Further, there has been no encouragement given by the ministry, as observations note, to help teachers to develop their own action research as a way of improving their teaching. After all, as most [men](#) on the street would say, the job of [a](#) classroom teacher is to teach, that is to disseminate knowledge to the children. [The idea of teachers conducting classroom research and writing reports about such research is still far-fetched as far as Malaysia education system is concerned.](#)

Issues relating to the limitations put on teachers from engaging in research has been emphasized and it is also reiterated by Borg (2009) who mentions that there is a need to raise awareness among teachers because some teachers may “have inappropriate or unrealistic notions of the kind of inquiry teacher research involves (p. 377)”. This is clearly so because action research differs from traditional research methods. Moreover, some people cannot see the benefits of action research when everything revolves around the class alone. Action [research](#) usually involves one class of students and the teacher but it may also involve just one teacher and one student, depending on what issue is being investigated.

Teachers are professionals because they have to go through [training programs and development courses designed to hone their abilities to teach competently.](#) Like every other profession that serves a purpose to meet the needs of a certain community of practice, [teaching also aims to fulfill the desiderata of learners](#) who attend schools and higher learning institutions to acquire general or specific forms of education, skill, knowledge, information, theories and special socialization skills. [The ultimate objective of teaching is to yield learned and well informed individuals who could function as active and productive agents of the society.](#) In that respect, language teaching and learning is essential to harness learners’ abilities to communicate, convey meanings and messages, [share thoughts and ideas through written and spoken words.](#) Language [is an important](#) skill which all learners, whether young or old, need to acquire, either to fulfil a need, want or goal. Just as a mother would want her children to be well equipped for an uncertain future, language teachers too, must [aspire](#) to impart as much knowledge as they can to their learners effectively. [To achieve this, teachers must provide best learning opportunities for their students and apply efficacious teaching methods.](#) Expanding on this premise, action research (AR) can be a very valuable approach teachers can apply in order to widen or improve their own teaching skills, and to [attain deeper understanding of their self](#) as teachers, their classroom environment, what their students really [seek to learn.](#)

In this paper, three main issues are discussed. First, what is the difference between AR and what all good teachers are doing. Second, why should teachers bother with doing research when, after all, they are employed and paid to be teachers and not researchers. [This is possibly something which most of teachers would think within themselves.](#) Third, to explore what AR entails as it is something which many language teachers seem to have heard about, but often, have only a hazy idea of what it actually is and what it involves. The section below elaborates on what action research involves.

Understanding Action Research

The term action research (AR) implies doing research with the intention of addressing a problem. The process begins with identifying the problem. Then, a plan is devised and implemented to solve the issue in concern. This is followed by a series of observation that involves data collection and analysis of data to determine the potency of the plan in addressing the issue. Finally, the entire process of action research is reflected upon. To reflect here means to think over the applied method or plan in order to evaluate if it had succeeded in solving the problem, and how the practice can be improvised or changed for better learning outcomes. According to Denscombe (2010, p. 6), “an action research strategy's purpose is to solve a particular problem and to produce guidelines for best practice”. Thus, AR can be conducted by individuals or as groups who share similar issues or problems.

Teachers and Action Research

Do teachers from schools favour this approach of making improvements to their own teaching? According to research conducted (see Meerah & Ahmad, 2001; Carpenter, 2003; Meerah & Osman, 2013), school teachers are not in favour of doing AR because they are more geared towards completing the syllabus and getting students prepared for examinations. In general, teachers are overwhelmed with student discipline matters, examination results, co-curricular activities, school event and many others, but conducting research is definitely not one of them. As mentioned earlier, the idea of teachers performing a research, collecting data, making an analysis and then producing papers for publication, is a rare commodity in Malaysian schools. In fact, this phenomenon seems prevalent in most parts of the world. Undeniably, teachers often see themselves as just teachers that is to teach students, and this means getting their students ready for whatever the curriculum requires of them. However, as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is becoming more and more pervasive, particularly at institutions of higher learning, the concept of doing action research, is more noticeable among practitioners and researchers alike. Hence, action research may be more common among lecturers at colleges or universities compared to teachers in schools.

Action Research is driven by the motivation to make immediate change to one's current approaches towards teaching and also learning of the students. In a world that constantly evolves, teachers can no longer teach in the way their teachers used to teach them, neither can they treat their students the way they were treated by their own teachers. Clearly, today's technology savvy generation is not solely dependent on teachers for purpose of learning due to the extensive amount of online reference and educational material at their disposal. Though the generation gap has widened, this does not mean that all teachers need to succumb to mediocrity or become helpless in facing challenges of teaching. Instead, teachers can resort to look for answers to those problems for which they must be equipped with the knowhow.

Aiming to make the notion of action research clearer, Burns (2009, p. 2) explains that, “Action research is related to the idea of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘the teacher as researcher’. AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts”. ‘Critical’ does not mean being negative and derogatory about the way one teaches, but about taking a ‘questioning’ and ‘problematizing’ stance towards one's own teaching. In AR, research, a teacher becomes an ‘investigator’ or ‘explorer’ of his/her personal teaching context, while at the same time, acts as one of the participants involved. Burns (2009) adds that, “One of the main aims of AR is

to identify a ‘problematic’ situation or issue that the participants – who may include teachers, students, managers, administrators, or even parents – consider worth looking into more deeply and systematically. The term ‘problematic’ does not mean that the teacher is incompetent or unable to manage his/her class. It is taken as a reference point for teachers to see for themselves any gaps existing in their current teaching situation and if so, what would they as teachers ideally like to see happening” (Burns, 2009, p. 2).

Curry (2009) argues that reflective practitioners can make their language teaching tools and methods solid with action research. Most researchers note that AR is useful not only in preparing future teachers but also for all teachers to continue to grow and develop as reflective practitioners. The components of action research are (selecting an issue, refining the research question, and undertaking data collection, analyzing multiple forms of data, developing and implementing new instructional strategies, and making the research findings public).

The idea of action research is fairly new, [as pointed out](#) by Meerah & Osman (2013) who note that it is something that has been taken with some reservations. They note that AR can be classified according to one of two purposes: i) To determine what is currently occurring [this could also entail inferential analysis] and ii) To test a hypothesis. They add that such research outcomes tend to be qualitative in nature that is, data are mostly descriptively analyzed. This is often because the research involves all the students in the respective classrooms. Nonetheless, Meerah & Osman (2013) affirm that the most important outcome that can be derived from AR is the findings that can enable classroom teachers to learn and improve on their performance. Nonetheless, this should not stop teachers from conducting experiments to test out their hypotheses.

To concretize the concept of AR, it is apt to [state what](#) Burns (2009, p. 2) notes [as](#) the fundamental premise of AR [that is](#) “to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice”. Burns (2009) adds that such improvements can only come about as a result of the information that [is](#) derived from the data which [has been](#) collected in the AR. Undoubtedly, like all research, data must not be compromised and need to be systematically acquired

As mentioned above, AR is the motivating force in the classroom. Teachers are the kind of practitioners who reflect upon their current teaching resources and methods to improve upon it so as to optimize the learning process, and in the process, help their students. In addition, sharing reflections and experiences is also a critical part of teachers’ professional lives ([Richards, 1999](#)) [cited in \(Burns, 2009\)](#). Two crucial concepts about how teachers reflect on teaching was discussed by Schön (1983). The first was termed as *reflection-in-action* and the second, *reflection-on-action*.

Reflection as practice

Reflection-in-action is “reflection on one’s spontaneous ways of thinking and acting, undertaken in the midst of action to guide further action” (Schön, 1983, p. 22). The reflection-on-action signifies what we do ‘on our feet’ in the classroom as we assess our own and our students’ reactions to the moment-by-moment activities and interactions that are taking place. In his explanation, Burns (2009) says that reflection-on-action occurs only after the event; it is a kind of ‘meta-thinking’ about what happened. In other words, reflecting on the decisions we, as teachers, have made, on our students’ responses as well as our own responses towards our students and on how

we thought and felt about the lesson, and then using these reflections to work out our reactions to it all. Schön (1987) says that without reflections, teachers may begin to think or talk about their teaching in a rather technical or automatic way without questioning teaching routines, or about rules in our teaching approaches, students, teaching contexts, or the philosophies or values that motivate what we execute in classrooms without much input for improvement. But the reverse works when teachers do reflections.

A 'reflective teacher' is one showing qualities that Dewey (1933, 1938) describes as the difference between teachers who operate routinely, and teachers who operate reflectively. The reflective teacher shows *open-mindedness* as he/she begins to listen to other points of view; he/she also exhibits *responsibility* as he/she becomes more alert to the consequences of his/her own actions; and he/she demonstrates *wholeheartedness* by putting the first two qualities at the center of his/her actions. The reflective teacher questions his/her assumptions and begins to introduce new approaches that do not place the students at the heart of the 'problem'. The teacher moves from a 'deficit' view of the students ('my students are the problem') to a deficit view of the learning situation as a whole ('there are problems in my teaching set-up'). The teacher [tries](#) to find ways to restructure classroom activities that will lead to better outcomes for the students and more productive use of class time.

Zeichner and Liston (1996, p. 4) develop the idea of reflective teaching even further. They argue that the reflective teacher concept is a reaction against a view of teachers "as technicians who narrowly construe the nature of the problems confronting them and merely carry out what others, removed from the classroom, want them to do". In Zeichner and Liston's (1996) view, reflective teaching is "empowering" as it provides a way for teachers to become actively involved in articulating the nature of their work and in extending the knowledge base of teaching. Reflective teaching enables teachers to complement the work of educational researchers, involve themselves in curriculum development and school change, and to take a leading role in their own professional development. Burton (2009) points out that three central questions underpin reflective teaching: *What do I do? How do I do it? What does this mean for me and those I work with?* Burton (2009) notes that strategies for teaching reflectively are wide-ranging and it helps create opportunities to link teachers' inquiries with 'public' academic theories. A reflective action researcher has many dimensions and possibilities.

Exploratory teaching

Nonetheless, some teachers may find that AR is not attractive, nor is it possible for them to go into a 'full-blown' AR process. Indeed, Allwright (1988) has argued that expecting teachers to do AR places a burden on them that may be impossible to fulfill. Thus, he proposes the idea of 'exploratory teaching' which, he argues, gives teachers, a way of exploring and understanding classroom 'puzzles' or 'dilemmas'. In his opinion, exploratory teaching is a more practical way of bringing "a research perspective" into the classroom without adding "significantly and unacceptably" to teachers' workloads by requiring them to do research. He suggests these procedures for exploratory teaching:

Steps to Exploratory teaching

Step 1 - Identify a puzzle area

Step 2 - Refine your thinking about that puzzle area

- Step 3 - Select a particular topic to focus upon
- Step 4 - Find appropriate classroom procedures to explore it
- Step 5 - Adapt them to the particular puzzle you want to explore
- Step 6 - Use them in class
- Step 7 - Interpret the outcomes
- Step 8 - Decide on their implications and plan accordingly

In the steps [listed](#) above, Allwright (1988) also notes that step 4 can be easily activated through a number of interesting classroom procedures which can cater to the learners need of exploring puzzles. They include:

1. Group work discussions
2. Pair work discussions
3. Surveys
4. Interviews
5. Simulations
6. Role-plays
7. Role-exchanging
8. Diaries
9. Dialogue journal writing
10. Projects
11. Poster sessions
12. Learner-to-learner correspondence.

Exploratory teaching shares many characteristics with AR. It also fits perfectly within the continuum of reflective teacher approaches suggested by Griffiths and Tann (1991). However, it keeps closely to the idea of exploring ‘teaching’, or more recently ‘practice’ (see Allwright, 2005 for an account of how the concept has developed) as the focus. In this respect, it would be unfortunate if [exploratory teaching](#) discourages teachers from contemplating that they, too, can enter the research community if they choose to do so. AR offers an inclusive and participatory perspective on the range of possibilities for research in the language-teaching field.

Why the need to do action research then?

From his own study, Middlewood (1999) notes that 94% of the respondents [were](#) of the opinion that action research had enabled them to learn new skills. They were also able to develop a sense of logical argument, critical thinking and problem solving skills as a result of conducting their own action research. Because of this ability to conduct action research, participants were also able to develop various other skills in their interpretation. Further, participants also noted that their teaching and learning process had been simultaneously enhanced, thereby, benefitting both teachers and students. Although Middlewood (1999) remarked that “Highly qualified teachers will be able to create an effective teaching plan to influence students’ learning process”, it is a statement that may need further verification because teachers may be qualified but their zest and passion for teaching [are](#) not necessarily tied to paper qualifications.

[Though](#) much of the literature noted highlight the need for action research to be pervasive in the education domain (see Zeichner, 1983; Bre & Boud, 1995; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Ramsden &

Moses, 1992), there has been lesser focus given to language teachers and language classrooms. From the review of literature, a number of scholars have suggested that only research may enhance teaching, and there is no possible relation in the other direction. While there is a negative relationship between teaching and research, a survey was done by Hogarth in 2004 to determine how teaching is influenced by research. Findings from the survey showed that there were benefits to students including: i) Motivating students' interest in the subject ii) Improving students' understanding of subject, iii) Encouraging critical reflection/analysis among students, iv) Providing teachers with up-to-date information and v) Students too can become a part of the research making them partners to the learning and teaching. From his survey, Hogarth (2004) drew the conclusion that teaching staff across the university should include aspects of their teaching in their research.

Case studies of action research

This section provides cases of action research conducted by practitioners and researchers alike as a way to show the actual development of the research.

Case 1- Improving classroom interactions

In 2015, Kuang, taught a course called 'Critical Reading and Writing' to a group of 15 multiracial, mixed gender, year two undergraduates. Within the first two weeks, she noted that her students were reluctant to participate in class discussions when they were individually asked for some input regarding certain issues identified in their reading texts. It was the usual one or two more outspoken individuals who often volunteered to share their thoughts while the rest kept silent. Kuang was exasperated because the course needed the students to think and speak their minds, and to support their input with relevant sources or evidences either from text or from facts. She reflected on this attitude of the class, writing down what could possibly be holding the students back. She then called up a few of these students in private, and using tea and biscuits as the opening point to their conversation, she began to learn a little more about each student. In her class, she also developed empathy for the students whose classes were back to back. She provided tidbits to the class to energize them, and in between classes she also told them personal stories which were linked to the reading texts. Over the weeks, the relationship developed and from week four onwards, she began applying the reflection exercise at the end of the class (during the last five minutes). There were three questions students needed to answer anonymously: What went well in class today? What did not go well in class today? What would you like to see more of in the next class? This also developed the students' ability to voice their opinions privately where the teacher was the only reader. This cut down insecurity. She then conducted an experiment on her class. She told the class that she was going to observe them over the weeks to see if things can be improved. She also expounded the theories on why student voices are important for the teacher. Though what could be gathered from the experiment will be shared with the students, the experiment was set on the condition that all things written down would be anonymous but honest. Data were collected, and then analysed. Analysis indicated that students found their learning environment boring and rigid. They wanted a better learning environment with air conditioning, bigger chairs and tables and space to move around. Students also noted that they preferred teachers with certain characteristics. Most of all, students wanted to be partners in the learning - they wanted to be given opportunities to negotiate for their learning through some key issues such as: number of assignments, deadlines

of submission, weightage of marks, class activities and also teaching methods and materials for learning. Based on the outcome of the action research, Kuang (2016) was able to emphasise with her students, adjust her teaching technique and develop a better relationship with her students so as to reduce their anxiety and build up their confidence, thereby enhancing class management. Kuang was also able to share the outcome with other colleagues and eventually, publish the paper too (see Kuang, 2016).

Case 2 – Looking for ways to assist postgraduate students in their academic writing

As lecturers teaching courses for postgraduate students, we noted that majority of our students lacked academic writing skills. Many were not just weak in [English grammar and sentence construction](#) but also [lacked coherence in writing and chapters organization](#). Our postgraduate students were diverse, coming from various parts of the world such as Asia, South Africa, and the Middle East [where for most English is not their native language](#). Hence, [their cultural background, educational experiences, and lesser employment of English language compared to native language](#) could be the cause of this issue. It was exasperating for [us, the lecturers](#), as we were not only reviewing [contents in their written drafts](#) but were also taking a lot of time to edit the students' language. Most of the lecturers in the 14 faculties and academies of our university had similar problems and [they often expressed concern over this issue during workshops](#) on postgraduate supervision for our academic staffs. So with serious issue at hand, how do we deal with it?

First, we offered ourselves to the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) in our university as trainers to carry out writing workshop. We [conducted](#) a two-day workshop on writing [of literature review](#) to assist the postgraduate students who signed up for the program. The workshop took [them through an in depth process](#) of what Literature Review was all about. [This was followed by review sessions where students would review a portion of an article and write about what they have read according to the guidelines and format taught](#). We as language lecturers perused their work and provided inputs and assistance to help the students produce better writing. Before the workshop commenced, students were asked to write about difficulties they faced when doing their literature review. They were told to write their responses in English in a paper. A linguistic analysis was then applied to the written phrases and expressions which denote their difficulties that were [categorized under common themes and manually counted in terms of the frequency](#). Based on this finding, we realized that the requirements expected of these postgraduate students did not match the postgraduate program the university offered. In that regard, we used our data to propose that a kind of support system is needed to enable these students develop their [academic writing](#) skills. Likewise, we presented our data to our colleagues and the paper was also published (see Kuang and David, 2015).

Discussion

This paper has discussed the concept of 'action' in action research. Novice teachers and teachers in schools and higher education are encouraged to embark on researches related to their teaching in order to improve their teaching as well as students' learning. The inculcations of the action research culture have been fostered at all educational levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) and are propagated as part of their practice to increase their professionalism as curriculum implementers in general. In this paper, the definition of action research was defined, the steps involved in doing

action research was also provided and previous studies highlighting why teachers are unable to conduct action research was also elaborated on. In addition, two case studies were also provided as an illustration to show what, where, when why and how the research was conducted. While previous studies have shown that there is much importance in conducting action research which serves as an insight into understanding the purpose of 'action' in action research and the need to share and apply the findings in teaching and learning, others have indicated that action research can also enhance the classroom context in other ways.

Meerah & Ahmad (2001) had noted that although the main function of a teacher is to teach, it has become a socially and academically accepted norm that 'reading journals' and conducting 'action research' on a regular basis are now considered professional responsibilities of Malaysian teachers, albeit additional ones. Their studies have examined the extent Malaysian teachers were able to venture into conducting action research especially those who have undergone in-service courses and workshops on action research. They also identified factors which could motivate such teachers to do action research. Although there were many 'bureaucratic constraints', it appears that majority of teachers were aware of the importance of research to improve teaching, and found satisfaction when they had the opportunity to report and share their findings with others.

Conclusion

Johnson (1993, p.2) cited in Brown (2002) states that "The future directions of staff development programs, teacher preparation curricula, as well as school improvement initiatives, will be impacted by the things teachers learn through the critical inquiry and rigorous examination of their own practice and their school programs that action research requires". He states that action research can be the tool to empower classroom teachers to examine their own practice through classroom based inquiry and be able to use the findings to reform their teaching overall. These actions of the classroom teachers, be it subject or language teachers, can be used as means to enable teachers to learn to reflect, in spite of their overwhelming responsibilities, and use the outcome to resolve issues with students and for personal development (Guskey, 2000). Another significance to be gained from teachers conducting action research is noted by Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994, p. 17) who say that AR enables teachers to "professionalize teaching and rethink . . . schools". Teachers who engage in AR often becomes more critical and reflective about their own practice (Oja & Pine, 1989). In this regard, it is imperative that classroom teachers, in particular, language teachers become more acquainted with the process of action research to develop their own practices.

Language teachers are aware that language skills are imperative for all learners as language is the conduit for learners to acquire knowledge, communicate and interact with others as well as gain social standing. With the right attitude towards teaching and learning, language teachers should be trained to understand why there is a need to conduct personal and individual classroom research so as to find resolutions to overcome any issues they may have in class. As has been noted by researchers, once the results are shared and their confidence developed, the attitudes of teachers could be positively aligned towards doing research and also enable them to develop the good

practice of doing self-reflection in their daily teaching practices instead of only giving them training that offers tips to overcoming classroom duties.

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